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U.S. critics of Soviet proposal rise to surface

By Roger Fontaine
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Defying a White House order not to comment on the latest Soviet arms proposals, U.S. officials characterize Mikhail Gorbachev's offer as a propaganda ploy and criticize the Reagan administration for taking it seriously.

One administration official, who asked to remain anonymous, called the proposals "nothing new" and the "same substance with a different style." However they package it, he said, the Russians are still trying to prevent the United States from developing and deploying missile-killing defenses in Mr. Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative.

Another administration official called the Gorbachev proposal on chemical weapons "no concession at all."

"They can dribble out these kinds of concessions for 10 years without addressing the problem," he said. The problem, he added, was adequate verification of both declared and undeclared stockpiles and production facilities.

Carnes Lord, who worked on strategic arms proposals for the National Security Council before joining the National Institute for Public Policy, told The Washington Times that aside from "a hokey but spectacular" timetable, there was little new in the proposal.

It was, Mr. Lord said, "designed to throw a monkey wrench in U.S.-European relations, and to throw a monkey wrench in European modernization" of nuclear weapons. And he added that President Reagan had "blundered" by calling the Gorbachev proposals something not seen before.

"We've heard it before with the old Soviet calls for complete and general disarmament," Mr. Lord said.

Another official cautioned that the Soviets were in effect "offering pie in the sky" in the distant future with its proposals, while getting in return concessions on "near-term programs important to our defense."

Ray Cline, director of research at Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies, shared that assessment. The Gorbachev offer

was "a gesture" intended to win a "political advantage," he said.

The Soviet concession on European missiles represents "piddling amounts," Mr. Cline said. It is a bargaining ploy, he said, on an issue that never has been substantive, and it is designed to obtain a significant concession from the United States on the SDI, and separating the United States from the British and French on arms control bargaining.

"The real ball to watch is whether the Soviets accept a cut in heavy missiles, and not some empty gesture dealing with British and French missiles," he said.

Several U.S. officials noted that the Europeans appeared to be less taken in by Mr. Gorbachev's proposals than the Americans. This was confirmed by Washington Times correspondents in Western Europe, who reported that the Soviet plan had been dismissed last week in London, Paris and Geneva as nothing new, with little additional comment.

Nevertheless, Moscow's public relations campaign continued to gain momentum with the Supreme Soviet, its rubber-stamp parliament, issuing a plea yesterday to an adjourned U.S. Congress. It called the Gorbachev plan "the only reasonable and feasible alternative to nuclear weapons" and again asked the United States to halt nuclear tests.

Mr. Gorbachev last August announced a unilateral test ban after completing a series of test explosions, and last week he extended the ban for another three months until the end of March.

"The time has come to put an end to the nuclear arms race madness. . . . The nuclear threat should be eliminated for good," the 1,500-member Supreme Soviet told Congress.

The Supreme Soviet statement also attacked SDI, calling it an "irreparable error" if ABM defenses were deployed.

"To take a practical step toward curbing the arms race at its most dangerous direction — the nuclear direction — further staging of any nuclear tests should be stopped, first and foremost," the message added.

The Gorbachev plan announced last week would get rid of all nuclear weapons by the end of the century, and would start

with a 50 percent reduction in Soviet and American ICBMs and removal of all U.S. and Soviet medium-range missiles from Europe.

It also promised to speed up talks on European security, chemical weapons and mutual reductions in conventional forces in Europe.

President Reagan and other officials have welcomed the proposal, but they have expressed reservations about Soviet insistence on eliminating the Strategic Defense Initiative as a condition for disarmament. They are skeptical, too, of how the 50 percent strategic arms cut would be achieved.

While U.S. officials were reacting cautiously, Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze sharply denounced the SDI at a Sunday press conference in Tokyo during which he urged Washington to consider seriously the Gorbachev proposals.

Mr. Shevardnadze said if comprehensive nuclear disarmament were obtained "then who would SDI be directed against? What would be its purpose? What would be the purpose of spending trillions of dollars?"

The Soviet foreign minister also expressed pessimism over the U.S. reaction to the latest proposal saying "a part of the U.S. government is trying to divide and make the initiative fall through."

The Supreme Soviet echoed this theme, saying, "Unfortunately, it has to be stated that to date the American side has not responded in kind to that peaceable action of the Soviet Union. New nuclear weapons explosions are conducted in the U.S.A."